Sacred Rivalries, Scared Realities:

Iran and Israel's Battle for Purity and Prophecy

Iraj E. Ghoochani

Wir werden geformt und gestaltet von dem, was wir lieben.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

You may ask: why Iran? Iran has no common border with Israel, so why are these two regimes locked in a fierce rivalry, often fighting in lands that do not even belong to them? To understand this part of the problem, we must not begin with the long history of the Israel-Palestine debate. This is the general mistake that most scholars make, and this article aims to take issue with that approach. To untangle this spaghetti of endless debate, we must shift our focus from historical recounts to its underlying structure. That is the key. Otherwise, every attempt to resolve the conflict by referencing its history only leads to another step backward, until Zionists argue that Jews were present in the land before any Muslim existed, while Muslims counter with Quranic references claiming that Ibrahim (Abraham) himself was a Muslim namely the first one, as seen in the Quran: "*Say, verily my Lord hath directed me into a right way, a true religion, the sect of Abraham the orthodox; and he was no idolater... Say, verily my prayers, and my worship, and my life, and my death are dedicated unto God, the Lord of all creatures... This have I been commanded: I am the first Moslem (Wa 'Ana 'Awwalu Al-Muslimin)"* (6:161-163). This endless regression leaves no room for resolution, as both sides continually attempt to outdo each other by digging deeper into the past.

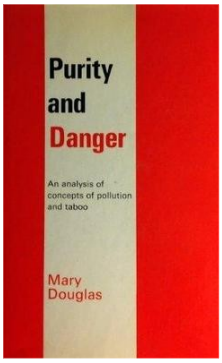
A striking example of this tangled narrative is the slogan "من النهر إلى البحر" (*min an-nahr ila al-bahr*, "*from the river to the sea*"), often chanted by anti-Israel activists. Though banned in countries like Germany due to its association with calls for the destruction of Israel, this slogan ironically mirrors the Zionist vision of the "*Promised Land*." Both sides, despite being fierce opponents, share a remarkably similar claim to the same sacred territory, albeit from opposite ends. This similarity reveals an even deeper irony: no regime in the world mirrors the ideological structure of Israel more than the Islamic Republic of Iran. Rivals often hate each other more than distant enemies, and the Israel-Iran conflict is a perfect example of this dynamic.

From River to Sea: A Reflection of Jewish Identity and Aspirations: In this imagined work by Frans Pourbus

the Elder, we witness a profound moment in Jewish tradition: God revealing the Promised Land to Moses. This vision encapsulates the essence of the Jewish national myth, a cornerstone of Zionism that connects the Jewish people to their ancestral homeland. The covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob resonates through generations, symbolized by the brit milah, affirming the eternal bond between the Jewish people and the land they hold sacred.

When Sacred Spaces Get Dirty: A Pig of a Showdown

This rivalry is not simply a geopolitical contest over land but a profound clash rooted in what can be described as a hygienic approach to sacred space. Both Iran and Israel view the purification of the land as essential—a necessary precursor to the arrival of their respective saviors. Here, the concept of purity is central, and Mary Douglas's theory in her book Purity and Danger (1966) helps illuminate the dynamics at play. Douglas explains that objects living on the margins—those that blur the lines between categories—are often viewed with the greatest hostility. For example, pigs, which have split hooves but only one stomach, are considered abominable because they fit some categories of edibility while violating others.



Purity and Danger: Mary Douglas explores the intricate relationships between concepts of cleanliness, pollution, and taboo across cultures. Published in 1966 and recognized as one of the hundred most influential non-fiction works since 1945, Douglas examines the *'dirt'* idea in various societies.

In the same way, Israel and Iran occupy a liminal space in each other's worldviews. Despite their animosity, they share key ideological traits—both are time-oriented regimes awaiting the arrival of a messianic figure—yet they represent competing versions of the sacred future. Each views the other as an impure distortion of its own divine mission. This shared similarity, paradoxically, intensifies their confrontation, leading to what psychoanalytic theory might call *abjection*: a hysteric reaction to something both familiar and repulsive.

Hair in a basin exemplifies the concept of abjection: once an integral part of our identity, it now occupies a liminal space, evoking discomfort and disgust. Stripped from the body, it is neither fully belonging to us nor entirely foreign, challenging our notions of cleanliness and the boundaries of the self.

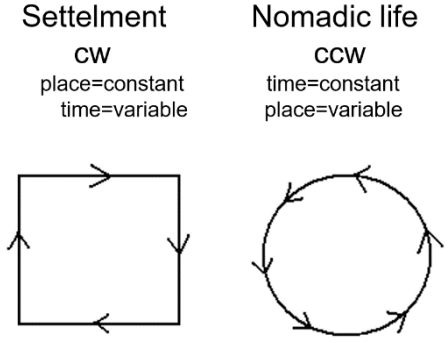
Again, the conflict between Iran and Israel cannot be understood through historical recounts alone. Such recounts only serve to deepen the endless cycle of regression, adding layers of complexity without bringing resolution. Instead, the conflict must be examined structurally, through the lens of shared ideologies, particularly their mutual obsession with purity and sacred time. It is this structural analysis—this focus on overlapping theological and ideological frameworks—that reveals why their rivalry is so intense and why it cannot be resolved through historical or political negotiations alone. It needs a very fundamental ethnopsychoanalytical and structural analysis of the meaning of settelment and hence occupation.

Societies of Time and Place – Nomads and Settled Communities in the Islamic World

The differences between Protestantism and Catholicism do not stem from intrinsic reasons within Christianity itself. As Max Weber demonstrated in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, there is a socio-cultural background that gives rise to Protestantism within the broader context of Christianity. Similarly, to comprehend the theological and political divisions between Sunni and Shia Islam, it is essential to examine the structural differences between nomadic and agricultural societies, which serve as primordial unconscious processes and foundational models underlying these divisions.

Nomadic cultures perceive time as relatively fixed, with life revolving around specific seasons. For nomads, the continuous cycle of seasons is experienced in various locations, embodying a sense of eternal spring that sustains their herds with necessary pastures. While their physical surroundings shift constantly, the rhythm of time remains steadfast and predictable.

In contrast, agricultural societies, such as the Satrapies of Persia, are deeply rooted in their landscapes and adopt a place-oriented worldview. Here, time is fluid and dynamic, marked by the changing seasons—spring, summer, autumn, and winter—each observed from a stable vantage point, such as the window of a home. The rhythms of agriculture dictate the passage of time, fostering a sense of continuity and order that profoundly shapes their beliefs and practices. This fundamental difference in how time and space are perceived significantly influences the divergent theological perspectives found within Sunni and Shia Islam.



Exploring the dichotomy of existence: the square with clockwise arrows represents settled life, where time is variable but place remains constant—anchored in the cycles of routine. In contrast, the circle with counterclockwise arrows signifies

nomadic life, where place is fluid and ever-changing, rolling over a long circular loop, highlighting the interplay between time and place.

In early Islam, the era known as *Sadr-i Islam*—the "*heart of Islam*"—presents a central, almost mythic period where time and place seemed to converge. The presence of the Prophet Muhammad embodied a living, sacred temporality, while the Kaaba in Mecca emerged as the ultimate sacred site in Islam. Following Muhammad's death, the Islamic world faced a crisis of orientation, prompting Muslims to seek an anchor in this disorienting time. Two distinct solutions emerged, reflecting the structures of their respective societies and functioning both as a model of and a model for those societies.

Left: This exquisite Persian miniature, *Mohammed carried to heaven (Maometto portato in cielo)*, beautifully illustrates the convergence of time and place in the era of *Sadr-i Islam*. Depicting the Prophet Muhammad ascending from the Kaaba. Reproduced in the early 1800s from Giuli Ferrario's *Il costume antico e moderno*, this artwork offers a glimpse into the rich cultural heritage and religious devotion that defined this pivotal period. Now part of the New York Public Library collection. Right: Another striking illustration of Muhammad praying at the Kaaba in Mecca, from the *Siyer-i Nebi*, a Turkish epic by Mustafa, son of Yusef of Erzurum. Originally completed in 1388 A.D. and beautifully illustrated during the reign of Murad III, this manuscript was finalized in 1595 A.D. It now resides in the Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul, encapsulating sacred time and sacred place in one frame,

Many Muslims, particularly in nomadic cultures such as those in Saudi Arabia and much of the Arab world, took the Kaaba as their anchor, prioritizing the holy place over a divinely inspired successor. This *place-based orientation* led to the institutionalization of leadership within the *Caliphate* (literally meaning "deputy"), where the *Caliph* became the custodian of the holy site. The Ottoman emperors even sent locks to Mecca to assert their position as deputies of the House in the absence of Muhammad as his *Caliph*. This act was deeply meaningful and symbolic of appropriation, akin to the key movement among Palestinians, which carries similar connotations through an inversive tool.

A historic lock from the Kaaba, one of the 59 recorded keys associated with this sacred site. Among them, 54 are housed in the Topkapi Palace Museum in Istanbul, while others are found in collections around the world, including the Nuhad Es-

Said Collection in Doha, the Louvre in Paris, and the Islamic Art Museum in Cairo. Each key serves as a testament to the enduring significance of the Kaaba in Islamic heritage.

The Palestinian key symbolizes the homes lost during the *Nakba* (catastrophe) marked by the expulsion and flight of over half the population of Mandatory Palestine in 1948. This key embodies hope for return and serves as a claim to lost properties. The *Nakba* represents the violent displacement and dispossession of Palestinian Arabs, leading to the destruction of their society and culture. The term reflects not only the events of the 1948 Palestine War but also the ongoing persecution and denial of rights faced by Palestinians. This image captures the entrance to the Aida refugee camp near Bethlehem, a poignant reminder of the fracturing of Palestinian society and the enduring quest for justice and the right of return.

In contrast, agricultural societies, such as the Satrapies within many Persianate states that relied on Kariz irrigation systems, were deeply bound to the land. These intricate systems were inseparable from permanent settlement, as one could not simply relocate a well or the Kariz. Moreover, the construction and maintenance of a Kariz required extensive collective labor and state organization. This collective labor bestowed an irresistible aura on the one who controlled it—a kind of

"Kariz-web charisma" born from their organizing gaze and presence. In this context, the king, as the central organizer of this vast effort, emerged as a critical figure, embodying time itself—the King of Time—passing through the place, bestowing it with life, order, and continuity. It is no surprise, then, that Iran remains the largest Shia country, and that their awaited savior, the last Imam (Mahdi), is also called "*Zaman*," which literally means "*time.*" *Imam-i Zaman,* meaning "*the Imam of our time*," is comparable to the concept of "*the king of our time*"—the one who, in this moment, exerts control over our lives. Just as a king governs the earthly order, *Imam-i Zaman* is seen as both a spiritual and temporal figure, appointed to bring justice, balance, and continuity to the world.

The Shia belief in the rightful succession from Muhammad through Ali and his descendants resonates with an agricultural worldview and political subjectivity, emphasizing the kingdom as a symbol of temporal continuity, even amid the rapid changes and replacements of authority figures. For Shia Muslims, the

awaited Mahdi embodies this continuity—an eschatological figure who not only embodies sacred time but also will return to restore the sacredness of place. His return signifies the reestablishment of divine authority, but to be a good Shia, one must keep the earth clean and prepared for his arrival. This time-oriented ideology manifests itself in an almost obsessive commitment to "*cleansing*" the earth, reflected in political and symbolic actions. This hygienic attitude is visible in the appropriation and purification of political spaces, most notably through acts such as the occupation of embassies, burning the flags of rival nations, or marching upon them—symbolic gestures of domination, occupation, or humiliation. These actions are part of a deeper impulse to purify and reclaim what is perceived as profaned spaces, aligning them with the sacred anticipation of the Mahdi's return.

In comparing Sunni and Shia practices regarding prayer, a distinct difference emerges that reflects their broader theological orientations toward time and place. Shia Muslims tend to prioritize the sanctity of the place over the precise timing of their prayers. They typically condense their daily prayers into three distinct periods rather than observing the five daily prayers at specific times. This practice is often accompanied by the use of *turbah*, a small piece of soil or clay that symbolizes the earth and is used during prostration in prayer. This emphasis on place resonates with the Shia belief in the significance of specific holy sites, particularly *Karbala*, where Imam Hussein was martyred. For Shia Muslims, cleaning the space and ensuring it is ready for sacred moments becomes paramount, reflecting their longing for the arrival of the Imam of their time, or *Imam-i Zaman*. In contrast, Sunni Muslims adhere to a more structured and time-oriented prayer routine. They perform five daily prayers at designated times throughout the day, following a precise timetable that underscores the importance of regularity and punctuality in their devotion. This ritual practice directs their focus towards the sacred place of the Kaaba in Mecca, towards which they turn five times a day according to an exact time-table. For Sunni Muslims, the act of prayer is intertwined with a sense of urgency and discipline, as they engage with the divine through a structured time frame that emphasizes their commitment to worship. Ultimately, this distinction highlights a broader ideological divide: Shia Muslims' focus on cleansing the place and the preparation for the sacred time contrasts with Sunni Muslims' emphasis on exact time and the discipline of structured prayer.

Left: A clock displaying the precise timetable for each prayer, symbolizing the Sunni emphasis on structured worship. Sunnis focus on cleansing their time as they direct their bodies toward the Kaaba. Right: A turbah, a piece of clay sourced from the sacred shrines of Shia Imams, reflecting the Shia approach to prayer. Shia Muslims prioritize cleansing the space on which they pray while also facing the Kaaba. They are both heterotopias. Heterotopia is a concept introduced by French philosopher Michel Foucault in his 1967 lecture "*Des Espace Autres*" ("*Of Other Spaces*")[1]. It refers to physical or conceptual spaces (like the clock on the left side that resembels an architectural gate) that are different from the mainstream, normative spaces in which we live.

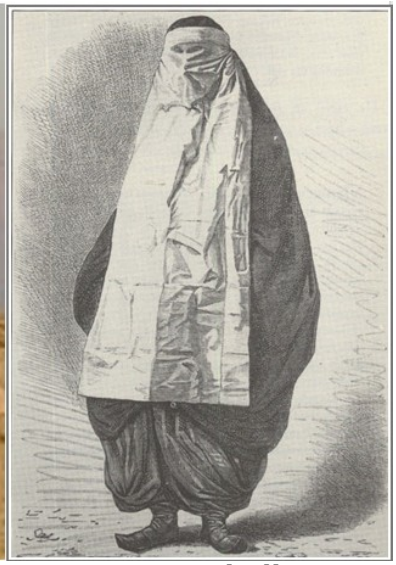
In short: Shia Muslims direct their bodies toward the Kaaba during prayer, similar to Sunnis, but they place their foreheads on a turbah—soil they consider clean and sacred. This practice highlights their belief in the significance of place as something that should hold clean for the sacre time to come. In contrast to the Sunni tradition, which strictly observes five daily prayers at specific times, Shia Muslims condense these rituals into three sessions. While both sects recognize the Kaaba as the qibla (direction), the difference lies in their focus: Shia Islam emphasizes the sanctity of the prayer place, while Sunni Islam is oriented toward adhering to a precise prayer schedule, directing themselves to the Kaaba as the only sacred place at exact times throughout the day. This divergence illustrates how Shia Muslims cleanse the place to prepare for the arrival of the sacred time (Imam-i Zaman), while Sunnis maintain a structured routine that reinforces their connection to the sacred place through specific prayer times.

This structural alignment between Shia Islam and the political subjectivity of thePersianate states helps explain why Iran has become the world's foremost Shia state. Its social and political structures have

[1] Foucault, M., & Miskowiec, J. (1986). Of Other Spaces. *Diacritics*, *16*(1), 22–27. https://doi.org/10.2307/464648

long resonated with the Shia’s time-oriented theology, which places emphasis on waiting for divine justice to unfold over time.

In these two images, خادمین حرم امام رضا (servants of Imam Reza’s shrine) hold the traditional duster used both for cleaning sacred spaces and symbolically enforcing the proper Hijab by softly striking women whose attire is deemed improper. This act reflects a political subjectivity where women are reduced to spaces that must remain clean and protected from the stranger's gaze, in preparation for the arrival of their rightful man—an echo of the awaited Imam Zaman’s return. As Durkheim observed, “In Religion verehrt Gesellschaft sich selbst” (“In religion, society worships itself”), this ritual underscores the intertwining of religious purity with societal control.



In these two images—a tent and a woman in a chador—we see a symbolic connection: the word “*chador*,” the most well-known form of hijab among Shias, literally means “tent.” This homophony is not accidental. It reflects the deeper cultural notion that the woman, like the tent, is reduced to a place or space for her man, who embodies the role of time. Just as a tent provides

shelter and stability, the *chador* signifies a woman's role and position as a place that should be protected and keep “clean” for her husband, reinforcing the gendered dynamic where man represents movement and authority, much like time itself.

Nomadic and settlement lifestyles serve as the underlying forces shaping two distinct approaches toward heaven, seen as the ultimate convergence of sacred time and place. These differing worldviews reflect how each culture envisions the ultimate reconciliation of time and space—the meeting point where the sacred is fully realized.

The Paradox of Similarity – Iran, Israel, and the Shared Theology of Purity

Now it is time to draw a simple comparison between Shia and orthodox jewish culture. The “*Haredi burqa sect*” (Hebrew: נשות השָאלִים, *Neshót haShalím,* meaning “shawl-wearing women”) represents a similar approach to modesty and gender roles found in ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities. Like the Chador in Shia Islam, the shawl or full-body covering worn by the women in this sect is meant to ensure extreme modesty, with some even adopting additional layers resembling a burqa. This practice reflects the belief that a woman’s body is a private space that must be hidden and protected from public view, mirroring a broader religious and cultural

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haredi_burqa_sect

tendency to associate women with modest, controlled spaces. In this sect, women's roles are similarly reduced to the metaphorical "place" for their husbands, with men functioning as the "time" that moves through and acts upon this space. The extreme modesty in dress is not just about religious piety but also about reinforcing a specific gendered relationship between men and women, where women are seen as needing protection and concealment, much like the sanctity of private or sacred spaces in traditional religious thought.

These examples demonstrate that the concept of "place" has long been a deeply ingrained and almost obsessive issue within both Shia and Jewish traditions. In both cultures, women are often symbolically equated with space—be it the Chador in Shia Islam or the shawl in the Haredi burqa sect of ultra-Orthodox Judaism. This is not restricted to Haredi burqa sect: In Jewish culture, the shawl takes on a significant role, particularly in the form of the *tallit* (prayer shawl). Worn during daily prayers and special occasions, the *tallit* serves as a reminder of the commandments (*mitzvot*) and the covenant between God and the Jewish people.The emphasis on covering and protecting women aligns with broader religious ideals of safeguarding sacred spaces from external influences or impurity.

This spatial preoccupation transcends gender, however, and extends into broader cultural and political realms. From the significance of the Kaaba in Islam to the attachment to sacred land in Jewish tradition, the focus on controlling and purifying space reflects a desire to maintain both physical and spiritual order. The deep historical and religious roots of this obsession with place manifest in everyday practices, as well as in larger political and cultural struggles, where space, land, and purity are interwoven with questions of identity, power, and authority. Here's a more concise and effective structural anthropological table comparing key aspects of Jewish culture and Shia Islam:

Aspect	**Jewish Culture**	**Shia Islam**
Modesty	*Tallit* and modest dress; emphasis on covering, especially in Haredi communities.	Hijab and *Chador*; modesty is essential for women.
Chosen People	**Bani Israel**: The Jewish people as the chosen ones.	**Seyeds**: Descendants of Muhammad, marked by black (Seyeds) and white (non-Seyeds) turbans.
Believe in Saviour	**Messiah (Mashiach)**: Awaited figure to restore Israel.	**Imam-i Zaman**: Awaited Mahdi to establish justice.
Cleansing Practices	Rituals of purification (*Mikvah*) and	Emphasis on cleanliness for the

	maintaining holy spaces.	arrival of Imam-i Zaman; shrine cleansing rituals.
Mourning and Festivals as Identity Enforcement Practices	Communal practices (Shabbat, festivals) reinforce identity.	Collective events (*Ashura, Majlis*) strengthen Shia identity.
Clergy Role as Interpreter of the Religion	Rabbis as spiritual leaders and law interpreters.	Clergy (Mullahs, Ayatollahs) guide Shia beliefs. Concept of *Velayat.*
Sacred Sites	Jerusalem as a key sacred city.	Karbala and Najaf and … as significant spiritual sites.
Ritual Significance	Life events (*Bar/Bat Mitzvah*) strengthen community bonds.	Important events (*Ashura*) commemorate historical significance.

We can expand this table to include aspects such as Body and Purity, as both cultures emphasize purity through dietary laws (kashrut in Judaism and halal in Islam). However, it's important to note that halal also applies to Sunni practices. What makes the similarities between Jewish culture and Shia Islam particularly intriguing is their shared culture of mourning and suffering, which has profoundly influenced their collective memory. The narratives of suffering—ranging from the early trials of Jewish history and excommunication to the Holocaust, alongside the martyrdom of Imam Hussein in Shia Islam—serve to reinforce both identity and solidarity within their respective communities. This shared experience of suffering adds to their similarities, which paradoxically can foster a deep harbor of resentment and hatred. In many cases, we find that we harbor more animosity toward our rivals than toward our true opponents.

Turf Wars and Tug-of-War: "The Zone of Interest" in the Israel-Palestine Conflict

The Israel-Palestine debate is often framed in terms of territorial and historical claims, but beneath these issues is a shared eschatological impulse that resonates on both sides. Zionism, especially in its religious form, envisions the "Promised Land" as a divinely sanctioned territory that must be restored to the Jewish people. Similarly, Shia Islam's eschatology holds that the world must be purified in anticipation of the Mahdi's return. In both cases, the land is not merely a political space but a ground to be prepared for divine arrival.

The phrase “*From the River to the Sea*” (*min an-nahr ila al-bahr*), associated with anti-Israel rhetoric today, ironically mirrors the early Zionist vision of reclaiming biblical Israel within its fullest boundaries. The idea of purifying the land, preparing it for a divinely ordained future, is a central theme in both ideologies. Israel seeks to secure and sanctify its territory for the coming of the *Messiah*, while Iran’s regime pursues a similar mission for the *Mahdi’s* return.

Both regimes exhibit a “hygienic” obsession with purification, rooted in theological beliefs that demand the land be cleansed. This idea of purification is not merely symbolic; it manifests in their policies, whether it be Israel’s control over settlements or Iran’s ideological battles across the region. Each sees itself as fighting a cosmic battle for the soul of the land, where purification is a prerequisite for the fulfillment of their messianic futures.

Gender segregation on public buses in both Israel (left) and Iran (right) reveals a striking similarity between the two regimes, despite their political differences. In Israel, *Haredi bus lines* enforced separation of men and women, sparking resistance and legal battles. Similarly, in Iran, women are required to sit in the back of public buses, a practice now increasingly questioned following the '*Women, Life, Freedom*' movement. In both cases, segregation reflects deeper ideological control over women's bodies and space, highlighting parallel struggles for gender equality in these two religiously governed societies.

The Theory of Purity and Danger – Abjection at the Borders

Mary Douglas’s theory of *purity and danger* provides a useful lens to understand the rivalry between Iran and Israel. Douglas suggests that objects or beings that exist on the borders—those that challenge categories of purity—are often viewed with hostility. Pigs, for example, are considered impure in both Judaism and Islam because they blur the boundaries between clean and unclean animals. In the same way, Iran and Israel occupy a liminal space in each other’s worldviews. Their shared commitment to religious purity makes them see each other as dangerous rivals, not simply enemies.

Each regime is locked in a struggle for purification, and each sees the other as embodying a distorted version of its own mission. They are not

entirely alien to one another; in fact, their rivalry is heightened by their similarities. They both occupy the “border” between the sacred and the profane. This sense of *abjection*—where the other is seen as both similar and repulsive—creates a hysteric intensity in their conflict. They are both trying to purify the world for their respective messianic figures, but each sees the other as the ultimate threat to that mission. This is not just a political rivalry; it is a theological and existential one, where the very nature of time, place, and divine order is at stake.

Conclusion: Iran and Israel as Time-Oriented Heterotopias

Iran and Israel exist as two exceptional entities within the broader Middle Eastern landscape—*heterotopias*, or “other spaces,” in that they are both distinct from the Sunni Arab world around them. They are not merely political outliers; their ideologies are time-oriented, driven by messianic futures that shape their present-day actions. Both regimes are deeply committed to the idea that the land must be purified in anticipation of a coming savior—the *Mahdi* for Iran, the Messiah for Israel.

As *heterotopias*, Iran and Israel navigate the sea of Sunni Arab cultures as though they were floating boats, each using *strategic depth* to secure their position. Iran manipulates its regional influence through proxies and alliances, while Israel ensures its survival through strategic partnerships and military strength. These actions are not just geopolitical strategies but reflections of their eschatological visions. This shared orientation toward the future creates a rivalry that transcends political differences. It is a conflict of purification, where each side believes it is the true custodian of sacred time and place. In the end, their rivalry is less about territory and more about the cosmic battle for the purification of the earth—a battle that will continue until their respective visions of the divine future are realized. An illusion that costs us our reality.